Master Drummer – Jesse Price

By Ross Russell

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In those days the barbecue ribs restaurants along Beale Street in Memphis were called “pig stands”, and to attract business employed jazz bands to draw crowds. The instrumentation was commonly violin, tenor sax, banjo, string bass and drums, and, besides the bands, there were kid dancers, who were an added allure and also helpful in passing the hat, which was part-payment of wages for the entertainers. One of the kid dancers who began his career on Beale Street around the end of the First World War, graduated from dancing to drumming, worked his first important job with the W.C. Handy Orchestra and, in the course of a long and distinguished career, played with the Count Basie, Chick Webb and Stan Kenton orchestras. His name is Jesse Price, and he is one of the neglected root figures of jazz drumming.

Price’s name turned up in the course of research for my book on Charlie Parker (reviewed elsewhere in this issue) and, since he was the original drummer in the Count Basie Orchestra, before Jo Jones’s tenure, and had known Parker as a teenager, he seemed an essential source, although he was one of those semi-legendary figures that one despairs of finding. There were rumours that he had died, but in fact he was not all that difficult to find. He lives modestly but comfortably in a rented brown stucco duplex in the West Adams area of Los Angeles and is still active in music. The price living room is a kind of minor booking office where weekend gigs involving such singers as Big Joe Turner, Cleanhead Vinson, Jimmy Witherspoon and T-Bone Walker are contracted for small clubs in that part of town. During the two afternoons I spent as his guest the house was a scene of constant comings and goings of interesting musicians, and of telephone calls, and in between all this he told me something of his long and varied life as a jazz-maker.

He was born Jesse Price, in Memphis, May 1, 1909, of Afro-American Indian parents. His father was a three-quarter Mohawk Indian, and Jess has the broad cheek bones and red clay colouring of his Indian ancestors. As a kid dancer on Beale Street he did the usual time-steps and, long before it became a national craze, the Charleston. “I was a long ways from being the best of those kid dancers”, Price recalls, “but dancing gave me a strong rhythmic foundation and a desire to play drums. I was always trying to get the drummer to show me things”. He also spent much of his spare time at the Palace and Pantages theatres, studying the drummers in the pit bands.

When Price was 14 he persuaded his father, a railway worker, to buy him a set of drums, and lesson were arranged with Frank Pole, the white drummer at the Pantages. He soon found himself a job with a group called Ross and Yancey’s Beale Street Serenaders (banjo, trombone, sax, and drums). After a year or so on the street, he came to the attention of W.C. Handy, the most prominent musician in the black community of Memphis and a contractor of bands for minstrel shows. Handy hired him in time to take part in a recording date for Columbia. Four sides, including ‘Loveless love’ and ‘Hooking cow blues’, were recorded

with portable equipment in Memphis and these have proved valuable discographical links between the kind of raggy band music heard in minstrel shows and jazz. Following the Columbia recording session Price accompanied the W.C. Handy Orchestra on an extended tour of the southern states.

Price recalls the famous leader-composer very well. “W.C. was a conservative man in speech, deportment and ideas about music. ‘Stick to the melody’, that was his main idea. His bands didn’t swing very much. They were on the ragtime order, and successful in minstrel shows. W.C. was very formal and insisted that everyone call him ‘Mr. Handy’. He in turn called me, ‘Mr. Price’, although I was only about 19 at the time”.

After the Handy tour and a spell of gigging on Beale Street, Price signed on the ‘S.S. Capitol’, one of the riverboats operated by the Streckfus Line of New Orleans. The Capitol sailed between New Orleans and St. Paul, touching Vicksburg, Natchez, Greenville, Memphis, St. Louis, Davenport, and many lesser river ports. The band leader was the well-known New Orleans trumpeter, Sidney Desvigne, and the instrumentation consisted of three trumpets, three trombones, four reeds and four rhythm. The music was designed for dancing by white patrons but had jazz and ragtime elements. Accommodations and food for musicians were excellent. The band’s pianist was Bert Lovingood, now said to be working in New York. The riverboat pianists also doubled on the steam calliope located on the top deck of the riverboats and in the full sight of the people in the river ports at docking time.

“Bert had a special tune for each town. For Memphis he would play ‘Memphis blues’, for St. Louis, Handy’s ‘St. Louis blues’, and for New Orleans, which was his own home town, ‘We’re in the money’. He belt out those theme songs as we came in, with the steam shooting up from the calliope. It always drew crowds down to the dock, we’d tie up and Captain Streekfus would start selling tickets for the dance. We’d play a matinee and an evening dance”.

After the summer of 1929 on the Mississippi, Price returned to Memphis. It was a major show business town and a booking centre for the T.O.B.A. which controlled vaudevile routes. As drummer in the pit band at the Palace he heard all of the great acts and singers of that day, including Ida Cox, Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, and, working as singles, the ragtime pianists James Scott and Scott Joplin. The schedule at the Palace called for four shows a day, two for white and two for blank audiences. “The black shows were the real thing”, Price says.

In the early ‘30s he acted as a leader of bands contracted for a chain of road-houses operated by a man named Eddie Lahr, and spread across Tennessee, Arkansas and Missouri. When the chain went out of business during the early years of the depression Price returned to Memphis and began making road trips as the drummer in companies carried by name singers. He recalls his days with Ida Cox and Bessie Smith with pleasure. “Both were fine to work with. As great as Bessie was, Ida Cox was the top box office draw”. Ma Rainey proved to be a difficult and tempestuous woman, boisterously profane and a heavy drinker. “She wouldn’t hesitate to stop the show and cuss out an audience. She used the worst language I had ever heard up until that time. On pay day, which was Friday night, Ma would start a crap game. She was a great hand with the dice and often won back all or part of the wages she had paid the musicians. The Rainey

company was called the Georgia Minstrels, and Price travelled with it to Kansas City where he gave notice and quit.

Kansas City was then in its hey-day as a good-time town. There was no depression, there were musical jobs in abundance. Musicians were drawn there from all over the Southwest, and there were more than 50 night clubs, cabarets and honky-tonks offering live music. Price arrived in 1934, several months before the death of Benny Moten and the reorganisation of the Moten orchestra under the leadership of Basie. Jess was then 25.

“Basie took over the band after Moten’s death, and hired me as the band’s drummer. He had the contract for the Reno Club, which was one of the top spots in town. It was owned by Papa Sol Epstein, who was in with the Pendergast political machine and ran the Reno without interference from the police. Prohibition and closing-hours meant nothing. The personnel of the band when I started was Joe Keyes, Tatti Smith and Prince Stewart, trumpets; Dan Minor, trombone; Lester Young and Herschel Evans, tenor saxes; Prof. Smith, alto: Jack Washington, alto and baritone sax; Cliff McIntyre, guitar; Walter Page, bass; Basie, piano, and myself on drums. There might have been another trombone, I can’t remember. But it was some band. We played heads and had a few charts that were the work of Prof. Smith”.

The Reno advertised “Five High Class Acts – Four Complete Floor Shows Every Night”. “The acts were good, too. There was a panic in most of the show business cities and some of the best talent came to Kaycee.”

The floor shows at the Reno lasted over an hour. The first began at nine at night and the last at four in the morning. After each show the band played dance music. There was a 15-minute break each hour, but it was a nine to five (or six) proposition, with no night off, no overtime, and on Sunday mornings there was a spook breakfast combined with a jam session which ended up sometime between 10 and noon. “I don’t know what the others got, but my pay was a dollar a night. There was a rumour that Basie was getting three. Money wasn’t the real object. You could live well in Kaycee on very little in those days.”

Girl trouble cheated Price of a shot at immortality as the drummer to record with Basie on Decca. In 1937, when the band was getting ready to leave Kansas City, he resigned so that he could stay in town, suggesting his close friend Jo Jones, as replacement. Prof. (Buster) Smith also quit. (Basie was then on his way to a break-through engagement at Chicago’s Grand Terrace, a coast-to-coast radio wire, and a long-term Decca recording contract!) Price and Buster Smith organised a band to play the College Inn at 12th and Wynadotte. The personnel was Orville ‘Piggy’ Minor and Dec Stewart trumpets; Fred Beckett, trombone; Fred Culliver, Jimmy Keith and Franz Bruce, reeds; Billy Hadnott, bass; Henry Smith and later Jay McShann, piano; and, on alto saxophone, an up-and-coming Kansas City musician named Charlie Parker. The 17-years-old Parker had just returned from a summer spent woodshedding in the Ozarks with a George E. Lee unit, a summer which changed him from the laughing-stock of Kansas City jam sessions to one of the most formidable musicians in town. “I’d known Charlie from the Reno Club days. He used to hang around the back of the bandstand at the Reno with a C melody sax in a carrying bag his mother had

made him out of a pillow ticking. A year before he'd been playing nothing. When Bird came back he was all over the horn. Prof. was his idol".

One of Price's feats in that period was his 111-chorus solo on 'Nagasaki' at a Kaycee cutting contest. Taken at an up tempo, this lasted for one hour and 15 minutes, and put and end to this particular test of manhood.

The lurid Pendergast era came to an end in 1939 with the conviction of the town's political boss on charges of federal income tax fraud. A reform element took over, night clubs were closed, jobs for musicians dried up, and the bands began to leave town. Price joined the Harlan Leonard for a stay of over a year, taking part in a series of recordings for RCA (reissued on RCA(A)LPV 531). The 16 tracks on this fine LP, in itself a first class example of Kansas City big band jazz, are the best available instances of Price's smooth, majestic, felt rather that heard style of drumming (e.g. ' Skee, Rock and ride', or 'Mistreated'). In addition to Price there is good tenor work by Jimmy Keith and Henry Bridges, generous samples of Fred Beckett, who influenced later trombonists, and an eight-bar introduction by the obscure Efferge Ware, one of Parker's mentors and, with Jim Daddy Walker, a guitarist from the Southwestern school which produced Charlie Christian.

Price's next job was in what had been Chick Webb's band. Webb's untimely death had left his group without either a leader or a drummer. Ella Fitzgerald, the band vocalist, took over the nominal leadership and Price eventually stepped into Chick's drum spot. A road trip brought the band to California in 1940, and Price left to gig in the Los Angeles area. He was a part of a Jimmy and Teddy Bunn group after the Spirits of Rhythm disbanded. In 1943 he took over percussion duties with the early Stan Kenton Orchestra which included such diverse talents as Stan Getz, Buddy Childers, Carl George, Bart Varsalona, Art Pepper, Bob Kesterson, Boots Mussulli and Gene Roland. The band recorded for Capitol and also backed a very young Anita O'Day on several sides for that label. Then Louis Armstrong came through town, needed a drummer, and persuaded Price to make his final major road trip, which lasted until after the war.

Meanwhile, he found Los Angeles a congenial town. The climate was to his liking, Many of the old Kansas City hands settled there – Harlan Leonard, Billy Hadnoff, Henry Bridges, Jimmy Forrest, Lester and Lee Young, Big Joe Turner, Winston Williams. Since 1946 Price has divided his time between record dates and casual engagements in Southern California. As a leader and blues singer he has recorded extensively for Capitol. He has also recorded for a variety of labels as a sideman with Jay McShann, Jimmy Witherspoon, Lips Page, Gerald Wilson, Ray Linn, Kay Starr, Andy Belvin and T-Bone Walker.

Price prefers to work in small combos nowadays. His present group includes Wiley Huff, trombone; Adolph Jacobs, guitar; Ezra Scott, piano and, on bass, Winston Williams, his old section mate from Kansas City bands. The Jesse Price Quintet is deep in the blues bag and often backs Big Joe Turner, T-Bone Walker, Cleanhead Vinson, or Jimmy Witherspoon, all of whom are living in Los Angeles, some of them in Price's own neighbourhood, and may be heard at various small clubs on the southwest side of Los Angeles.

His favorite drummer? "Chick Webb! Tops! Chick knew how to set a tempo and hold it. He had a way of playing almost behind the beat and just catching it

with a quick stroke”. He also admires Webb’s cymbal sound, his four-bar breaks and ability to build band climaxes. When Webb’s old drum set found its was to a Hollywood musical instrument shop Price was the buyer and that set has a prominent place in his crowded, peopled living room. At many of his gigs these days he uses the same snare drum and tom-toms that were so long ago featured on those stirring nights before the Second World War at the Savoy in New York.